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Organisational Connectedness and Well-being

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Abstract

The construct of organisational connectedness is proposed as a protective factor for well-being. Previous research has demonstrated a prospective link between a similar construct, school connectedness, and adolescent psychological well-being (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). School and workplace environments share the characteristic of being primary extra-familial social contexts. The aims of the present study were (a) to develop the Psychological Sense of Organisational Membership scale (PSOM) by adapting Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (PSSM; 1993) to the workplace context, and (b) to investigate the relationship of PSOM scores to measures of psychological well-being in an adult population. The PSOM and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) were administered to 125 employees at a disability services organisation. The data confirmed expected levels of relationship with both contextual workplace constructs and measures of psychological well-being. Correlations between the PSOM and psychological well-being measures were -.54 (depression), -.39 (anxiety), -.45 (stress), and -.53 (negative affect). Results were interpreted from belongingness, social-cognitive and self-psychology perspectives, and are consistent with a strong link between organisational connectedness and resilience.

Introduction

Resilience can be conceptualised as the ability to withstand environmental insult, with the effect of a negative stimulus on well-being being minimal and of short duration. This is a highly desirable trait in a workforce from the point of view of both the individual and the organisation. A large body of research now substantiates the link between poor adaptation to work stress and poor physical and psychological health (Fortes-Ferreira, Peiró, González-Morales, & Martin,

2006; Smit & Schabracq, 1998). A large scale study ($N=16,001$) with participants from a range of sectors and industries has also confirmed a robust link between psychological well-being and productivity (Donald et al., 2005).

Unfortunately it is clear that a substantial and growing proportion of the workforce have poor psychological well-being, manifest as a range of symptoms and conditions indicative of an inadequate capacity to adaptively cope with stressors. Burnout is an exemplar of such conditions. It is chronic and exhibits a high degree of temporal stability often lasting for years and being associated with a range of poor health outcomes (Goddard, O'Brian, & Goddard, 2006; Honkonen et al., 2006). It is also well established that, like anxiety, burnout is often linked to depression as a precursor or a comorbid condition. In general, then, stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression form a cluster of related negative affective conditions (Shirom, 2005).

A variety of research has highlighted the strong role of social contextual factors in promoting resilience and well-being (Holahan, Moos, & Bonin, 1999; Lent et al., 2005). It is likely that these factors include a sense of connectedness to, or within the context of, an organisation. Cockshaw and Shochet (2007) have defined organisational connectedness as the extent to which individuals feel accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the organisational environment. This follows a similar definition for the related construct of school connectedness (Goodenow, 1993). Very few studies, however, have investigated the contribution of the workplace social context to psychological well-being. One of the few studies addressing this topic examined the relationships between organisational identification, organisational commitment, turnover intentions and psychological well-being (Harris & Cameron, 2005). Regression

analysis revealed a link between the organisational identification factor of in-group affect and the well-being factor of self-efficacy. There is clear need for investigation of the link between organisational social-cognitive factors and psychological well-being as, for many adults, the workplace constitutes the primary extra-familial social context.

A similar question regarding the impact of the school social environment on adolescent psychological well-being has been investigated by several researchers. Shochet et al. (2006) investigated the link between school connectedness and depression, general well-being and anxiety, and reported correlations of between -.62 and -.74 with depression scores, between -.51 and -.68 with well-being scores and between -.30 and -.40 with anxiety scores. These data confirm that school connectedness is an important correlate of adolescent psychological well-being. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that school connectedness predicted future depressive symptoms in girls and boys, anxiety symptoms in girls, and poor general psychological well-being in boys, after controlling for pre-existing mental health scores and at a time one year later. This suggests that factors related to the school social environment are involved in the development and maintenance of negative affective conditions.

In another study of adolescents it was found that school connectedness had a substantially stronger relationship to depressive symptoms than did parental attachment, with a correlation of -.67, compared to -.50 (Shochet, Homel, & Montgomery, 2007). This suggests that feelings of connectedness within a primary extra-familial context, such as a school or workplace, may be more influential with regard to psychological well-being than social-cognitive factors related to the home environment. Given these findings, the present study investigated the link between organisational connectedness and psychological well-being in adults.

Method

A questionnaire was assembled including measures of organisational connectedness, psychological well-being, and several established workplace related constructs, the later serving as a basis for comparison for the strength of relationship between connectedness and well-being measures.

Participants

Employees from a Queensland based disability services organisation ($N=125$) were recruited at staff meetings. A variety of staff participated including those fulfilling administrative and client service roles. Of participants who indicated gender, 36 were male and 88 were female. The average length of employment was 4.22

years ($SD=4.92$). The mean age of employees at the organisation was 40.5 ($SD=12.7$).

Measures

Psychological Sense of Organisational Membership (PSOM)

The PSOM was developed by adapting the 18 items from the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993) to the adult workplace context. The PSSM was developed for use with adolescent students and is scored on a five point Likert scale from "not at all true" (1) to "completely true" (5). Goodenow conducted a series of studies and reported an alpha of .88 among adolescents (alpha coefficients for measures in the present study are presented in Table 1). Items address the sense of being personally liked, accepted, included, respected and valued by teachers or fellow students. Five items are reverse scored. To create the PSOM, "manager/supervisor", "employees" and "organisation" were substituted for "teacher", "students" and "school" respectively.

Affective Commitment Scale (ACS)

Affective commitment has been conceptualised within a tripartite model of organisational commitment comprised of affective, continuance and normative commitment. Affective commitment is the emotional involvement with, or positive affect towards an organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993; Meyer & Allen, 1997). As such, it can be viewed as a reciprocal construct to organisational connectedness, being the perceived affect of others in the organisation towards the individual.

The most recent version of the ACS (Meyer & Allen, 1997) is comprised of 6 items endorsed on a 7 point scale, anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (7). Reliabilities reported by Allan and Meyer (1996) are typically above .8. Two items are reverse scored.

Life Role Salience Scales

Amatea, Cross, Clark, and Bobby (1986) have developed eight 5 item Life Role Salience Scales. Two of these scales, the Occupational Role Value scale (ORV) and the Occupational Role Commitment scale (ORC), are directly applicable to the workplace and were employed in the present study. Occupational role value is conceptualised as the personal value attributed to identification with a particular vocation, and the sense of reward afforded by its fulfilment. It relates to attitudes towards the function fulfilled within an organisation rather than the people within the organisation. Occupational role commitment is conceptualised as the intended allocation of personal resources such as time and energy to fulfilling a vocational role.

These measures are endorsed on a 5 point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). Amatea et al. (1986) reported reliabilities of .86 and .83 for the ORV and ORC respectively. For the purposes of the present study, scale scores were taken as the average item score and hence range from 1 to 5. One item in each scale is reverse scored.

Short Form of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS21) An appropriate instrument for the measurement of several facets of adult psychological well-being is the well known 21 item Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), developed in Australia and recently normed against a non-clinical adult population in the UK (Henry & Crawford, 2005). This scale is comprised of three 7 item subscales for depression, anxiety and stress. Henry and Crawford have also demonstrated a higher order composite factor representing negative affectivity (NA), also known as psychological distress. A Likert scale ranging from “did not apply to me” (0) to “applied to me very much or most of the time” (3) is employed. Henry and Crawford report reliabilities of .88, .82, .90 and .93 for depression, anxiety, stress and NA respectively.

Results

Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies and intercorrelations for all measures employed in the present study are presented in Table 1. Mean scores for workplace related constructs (PSOM, ACS, ORV, ORC) were all above the scale midpoints. Measures of well-being derived from the DASS (depression, anxiety, stress and negative affect) all exhibited substantial positive skew, with most participants scoring in the “normal” range and fewest in the “severe” and “very severe” ranges, as would be expected in a non-clinical sample. Collinearity was apparent between NA and both depression and stress, consistent with NA being an overarching composite measure. The correlations of both the PSOM and the ACS to well-being scores were substantial, with the largest relationship for each DASS subscale being with the PSOM. Correlations of the vocational role related

scales, the ORV and the ORC, to well-being measures were very low, with each being less than .1 in magnitude.

Discussion

The results presented here strongly support a link between a sense of connectedness, to or within the context of an institution, and a range of well-being factors. Depressive symptoms and general negative affect were particularly strongly related to organisational connectedness. Organisational connectedness is conceptualised as the perception of attitudes toward, and appraisal of, the individual by others in the organisation. Conversely, affective commitment relates to attitudes towards, and appraisal of, the organisation by the individual. Organisational connectedness exhibited a stronger relationship than affective commitment with all measures of well-being. This suggests that regard for the individual within an organisation is more important with respect to well-being than the individual’s attitude towards the organisation as a social context, and by extension others within it. Furthermore, attitudes of the individual towards their vocational role exhibited minimal correlation with well-being measures. It can be concluded that, within this sample at least, social cognitions regarding the appraisal and support of others were much more strongly linked to psychological well-being than a range of other workplace related constructs.

Similarities are evident between the results presented here and those reported by Harris and Cameron (2005). In the present study the correlation between affective commitment and negative affect was found to be -.31, which compares favourably with the correlation of .38 between affective commitment and subjective well-being reported by Harris and Cameron. Interestingly, Harris and Cameron also reported a high correlation of .63 between the constructs of affective social identification (essentially feeling ‘part of’ an organisation) and self-efficacy, supporting the growing body of research indicating that cognitive structures related to the self, play a role in the interplay between interpersonal factors and psychological well-being.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies and intercorrelations for all measures.

measure	mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 PSOM	3.81	0.76	.94	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 ACS	4.24	1.36	.82	.57**	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
3 ORV	3.89	0.70	.71	.21*	.17	1	-	-	-	-	-
4 ORC	3.31	0.92	.81	.15	.14	.64**	1	-	-	-	-
5 Depression	3.04	4.01	.89	-.54**	-.37**	-.01	.04	1	-	-	-
6 Anxiety	2.00	2.99	.83	-.39**	-.21*	.08	.03	.59**	1	-	-
7 Stress	5.26	4.46	.88	-.45**	-.22*	.06	-.08	.70**	.60**	1	-

8 NA	10.31	9.99	.93	-.53**	-.31**	.04	-.01	.89**	.80**	.90**	1
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** $p < .01$ (two-tailed); * $p < .05$ (two-tailed); PSOM=Psychological Sense of Organisational Membership (adapted from Goodenow, 1993); ACS=Affective Commitment Scale (Meyer & Allen, 1997); ORV=Occupational Role Value (Amatea et al., 1986); ORC=Occupational Role Commitment (Amatea et al., 1986); Depression, Anxiety and Stress=Subscales of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995); NA=total score for DASS21. Further interpretation of this data with respect to the psychometric properties of the PSOM and specific interpersonal theories of depression are reported elsewhere (Cockshaw & Shochet, 2007).

The results of the present study can be interpreted from several theoretical perspectives. The belongingness hypothesis proposes that a sense of belongingness is a fundamental human motivation or need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary suggest that one criterion that must be satisfied in order for a drive or desire to be classified as a need is that it must "lead to ill effects (such as on health or adjustment) when thwarted" (p498). It would appear then that organisations may be a vital context for such a sense of belongingness. Further, it could be concluded that, if such a possibility is supported by on-going evidence, organisations should consider the effect of the social environment as a risk or protective factor for well-being in the same way that direct physical or physiological risk or protective factors are presently considered.

The particularly strong relationship of organisational connectedness to depression and the related construct of negative affectivity is consistent with emerging interpersonal perspectives of the aetiology and maintenance of depression. Sacco and Vaughan (2006) have proposed a social-cognitive model of depressogenic interpersonal processes. In this model negative perceptions of others' appraisal and support give rise to depressive self-concept, affect and behaviour of the individual. These behaviours lead others in the social environment to develop negatively valenced person schemas and attributions regarding the individual which in turn give rise to increased rejection, criticism and non-genuine support. A depressive state within an individual is hence precipitated and maintained by reciprocal transactions within a psycho-social system involving both intra-personal and interpersonal processes. Depressive behaviours identified include reassurance seeking and self denigration. It could also be suggested that the behaviours may include reduced engagement with others stemming from depersonalisation or reduced self-worth.

A relationship between psychological well-being and constructs related to the self is also consistent with self-psychology theory, initially developed by Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984). This theory proposes that the development of a positive, stable and cohesive self schema provides a buffer against negative environmental stimuli. The construction of such a self, however, is a developmental process which requires that three needs be met. First, is the sense of being among similar others, termed twinship or belonging. Second is a set of goals and qualities to which to aspire, termed idealisation. Third is the sense of being validated and valued by others, termed mirroring (Baker & Baker, 1987; Lynch, 1998; Romano, 2004). As, during the developmental process, these needs are fulfilled by others (or more precisely, mental representations of others), they are termed self-object needs. Ideally, a robust sense of self-worth develops

which gives rise to resilience. Kohut believed, however, that to some extent the hunger for externally referent fulfilment of selfobject needs always remains (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Karrel & Gill, 2002). In sum, a link between organisational connectedness and psychological well-being is consistent with several theoretical perspectives of well-being in general and depression in particular.

The results presented here must be interpreted with regard to limiting factors within the study design. This study is cross-sectional in nature, hence whilst relationships between resilience and social-cognitive factors related to the organisational environment are suggested, the direction of these relationships cannot be specified. It should be noted, however, that longitudinal data has been reported regarding the relationship between adolescent psychological well-being and school connectedness (Shochet et al., 2006). The sample employed in the present study was drawn from a single organisation, hence there is a need to confirm the viability of the construct of organisational connectedness and its link to psychological well-being in other adult populations. Also, this study constitutes an initial exploration, addressing only a few of the many pertinent organisational psycho-social factors. On-going research into the nexus between these factors and facets of psychological well-being is warranted.

In conclusion, this preliminary evidence indicates that, within the organisational environment, social contextual factors in general and organisational connectedness in particular may impact powerfully on psychological well-being. It is important to highlight that this impact may be positive in nature. Positive perceptions of being accepted, respected, included and supported, within the organisational social environment, may give rise to increases in resilience and well-being, beyond that afforded by connectedness within other social contexts. This would clearly be of benefit to both individuals and the organisations to which they belong.

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